Rapid globalization, the expansion of global capitalism, technological developments, changes in media and new social formations all created fundamentally different topographies. In the latter part of the 20th century, in the face of sweeping globalization, nation-states were engaged in new nation-building processes, and regionalization in various realms — economic, political and cultural. In pop culture, consuming and circulating regionally produced entertainment became prevalent, partly because of new global marketing strategies. Transnational media companies divided the world into several markets in which both Western and regional products were offered in order to increase profits. In Asia, the establishment of Star TV is a good example of this regionalization strategy. In addition, rapid economic growth in Asia generated the need for new cultural products that would cater to the desires and lifestyles of Asia’s burgeoning class of consumers. Asian youths, in particular, have become a significant consumer group, partly as a result of their embrace of technology and the Internet, their growing economic means and their transnational taste in pop culture. Despite this changing environment, Western, especially American, pop culture maintained its dominance, but some Asian pop culture found a niche, such as Hong Kong films and Japanese TV dramas, pop music and animation. The Korean Wave emerged in this context, following on from the success of Hong Kong and Japan.

By the late 1990s, the decline of the Hong Kong film industry and the fading novelty of Japanese pop culture left room for Korean pop culture to emerge in Asia.1 By this time, the South Korean media sector had accumulated the skills to produce interesting pop culture with a competitive edge in the region. Economic hardship, particularly when South Korea was hit so badly by the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998, and fierce...
GLOBAL ASIA Feature Essay Why ‘Gangnam Style’ Isn’t Hallyu Style

Gangnam Style’s attraction is different from other Korean pop music. Stars are usually ‘idol group’ members — males with masculine bodies and pretty faces or lean and leggy females with sexual appeal. By any measure, Psy does not meet these criteria for a Korean pop star. He is chubby, average-looking, middle-aged and married with children.

domestic competition also propelled Korean entertainers and management companies to explore overseas markets. To everybody’s surprise, Korean music, TV dramas and films quickly became enormously popular, beginning in the greater Chinese region, and over the course of a few years became the cultural phenomenon in Asia now called the Korean Wave. Hallyu’s reception in Asia, however, has not been simultaneous or uniform. Its epicenter was greater China, on the mainland and in Taiwan. It then spread to Southeast Asia but reached Japan somewhat later. Besides the time gap, there are other variations in how the Korean Wave spread, such as which genres were most popular where, core fan groups, reasons for the popularity of specific products, and so on. For example, while music and TV dramas were the most popular genres in Taiwan and China in the early years, in Hong Kong it was films that caught on. In Japan, it relied at the beginning almost solely on the success of one particular TV drama, “Winter Sonata,” which also became a big hit in the Philippines.

By the same token, the core fan groups also differ from country to country. In China, fans of Korean TV dramas span all ages; in Japan they are largely middle-aged. In addition, audiences in some Asian countries are attracted to Korean TV dramas because they aspire to the luxurious and modern urban lifestyles on display. In other countries, the allure is found in the nostalgic themes or the depiction of contemporary sociocultural issues that are relevant to them. At the same time, Hallyu has been in constant flux, so local manifestations of the phenomenon have changed over time. If we look beyond Asia to what made Hallyu popular in other parts of the world, the explanations become even more complicated. Indeed, it would be almost impossible to come up with a generalization that can encompass all the varieties of Hallyu in different parts of the world. Hence, for a more systematic understanding of Hallyu and Gangnam Style, a contextualized analysis of the phenomena would be helpful. In addition, Gangnam Style’s relationship to Hallyu should be critically evaluated instead of lumping the two together as if they were identical. Drawing on these approaches, I will discuss Gangnam Style’s success in the US and its ramifications for Hallyu in America and beyond.

PSY BREAKS THE MOLD
Gangnam Style’s success is unique and interesting for several reasons. First, it is not the outcome of a well-choreographed plan. Since Hallyu broke big in Asia, many South Korean entertainment companies and entertainers have sought to penetrate the Western market, especially the US. With the support of their management companies, Korean pop music stars such as Bi (Rain) and Wonder Girls made overt efforts to make a big hit in the US, with less than satisfactory results. South Korean movie stars and directors have also tried to tap into Hollywood, again with limited success.

Compared to these long-term, prepared efforts to enter the US market, the overnight popularity of Psy’s hit was totally unexpected. Thanks to the power of modern information technology, especially YouTube and social media networks (including voluntary, word-of-mouth publicity by US celebrities), the music video became a sudden global sensation. It could be viewed as sheer luck, but it is undeniable that the music video had elements that struck certain emotional and/or aesthetic chords in audiences around the world.

Second, Gangnam Style’s attraction is different from other Korean pop music (and pop culture in general). In Asia, Korean pop music stars are usually “idol group” members with certain visual styles and physiques — males with masculine bodies and pretty faces or lean and leggy females with sexual appeal that projects either beguiling innocence or exuberant sexuality. Solo musicians also generally fit these formulas. By any measure, Psy does not meet these criteria for a Korean pop star. He is chubby, average-looking, middle-aged and married with children. He is comical rather than gorgeous or sexy. Also, at least in South Korea, he is known for having a flawed past, including fraudulent military service and drug-related charges. Interestingly, however, what attracted the US audience (and perhaps other non-Asian audiences) was precisely his comic style, chubbiness, catchy tune and cheesy-yet-fun dance moves. Many young US viewers I talked to told me that they liked the music video because it’s funny and fun. In fact, the “fat Asian man dancing funny to a catchy tune is viral,” said one American. In this regard, Psy broke the stereotype of a Korean pop star.

Third, his music style and visual aesthetics are hardly “mainstream” in South Korea. From his debut as a performer, he has made a rebellious, satirical, vulgar and “B-class” style his trademark. In doing so, he established his niche and gained a level of local fame, but there is something about him that is marginal and different, despite his personal background as a real “Gangnam guy.” So it is interesting that global audiences so enthusiastically embraced this non-mainstream Korean pop music artist with such fanfare. The viral energy that Psy exudes to go along with the video’s easy-to-follow dance style, catchy tunes, and satirical scenes all probably contributed to that. Perhaps, at least in the US, Psy’s atypical characteristics, which differ from the stereotypical image of Asians and Asian Americans, may have added another layer of attraction, since they are unique and unexpected. Since Psy’s global fame is relatively new, it is premature to clearly understand and explain the root cause of his popularity. However, the fact that it is Psy who catapulted to world stardom ahead of mainstream South Korean pop stars who relied on well-planned and well-designed strategies illustrates the limitations of “cookie cutter” styles and images for K-pop stars. To achieve global stardom, probably a unique individual style and creativity speak volumes. Fourth, although Gangnam Style may have

1. In some parts of Asia, Japanese pop culture achieved dominant status along with US pop culture. It has become “localized” or “domesticated” over time, so although it became prevalent and dominant, it lost its fresh appeal. In that context, the continuous quest of consumers for something new and different opened a door for Korean pop culture, which was a newcomer at that time.
2. This situation has changed over time. For example, there are more diverse Hallyu fan groups in Japan nowadays.
3. It seems that Psy is likely recognized by his broader racial/ethnic category, Asian, rather than by his specific nationality. Although he has repeatedly made his nationality clear when he appeared on US TV. Even though most of his song’s lyrics are in Korean, US audiences seem to consider it something “Asian” or “foreign.” The long, broad tradition in the US, which lumps all Asians together, seems to be at play here.
drawn a degree of attention to Korean pop culture among US audiences, it would be a stretch to say that it marks the success of Hallyu in the US at large. Hallyu has existed among small segments of the US population, mainly centering on Asian American populations, and perhaps the music video’s success has broadened the fan base a little more across ethnic/racial boundaries. However, it could be that Psy will eventually be seen as a passing fad for the majority of US audiences. (Psy’s follow-up music video, “Gentleman,” has generated a more muted but still significant reaction on YouTube with more than 500 million views, the eighth most-viewed YouTube video of all time; Gangnam Style is still top with almost 2 billion.) Most Psy fans are not clearly aware of the origin and ethnic background of the singer and the song. Hence, Gangnam Style’s success is less likely an indicator of the success of Korean pop culture at large than individual success. However, if Psy succeeds in establishing himself in the US with the support of his strong US agency, then his role as a leading man for Hallyu in the US might become feasible.

4. Idol groups with similar styles (in terms of their music and look, choreography, and so on) have been produced in different parts of Asia.
5. My young American interviewees told me that Asian entertainers, especially men, tend in their view to look “too feminine.” The androgynous look popular in Korea and Asia does not seem to be attractive to many US audiences, which may explain why Psy was more easily accepted.

WHAT DOES PSY DO FOR HALLYU?
What are the ramifications of the success of Gangnam Style for Hallyu? First, it made the dream of global reach a reality. Although it still is a relatively new and isolated case, it has shown that Korean pop culture can have global appeal, which will motivate aspiring Korean entertainers to keep pursuing a global dream. Second, it opened a door for alternative and diverse approaches to the world. Technological advancement has enabled new ways of drawing attention across borders. Given the widespread interest in and familiarity with electronic devices and programs among South Koreans, Psy’s overnight YouTube success story may inspire innovative and creative uses of technology for Hallyu. Third, Gangnam Style’s success demonstrated the importance of having a distinctive individual style and creativity. While the systematically trained and managed entertainers bred under South Korea’s “star system” may have proven themselves through their popularity in Asia and beyond, there are so many of them with similar styles that the niche may become saturated sooner or later. Moreover, what may work in one region may not work in another. Hence, developing unique styles that have broader appeal or that may fit in a target market would help increase an entertainer’s chance of gaining popularity. Although it would be an exaggeration to equate Gangnam Style’s success with that of Hallyu per se, in a way, its success has contributed to Hallyu’s evolution by suggesting a broader scope, diverse styles and new strategies. So it will be interesting to observe whether the new phase of the Korean Wave can move beyond its current limitations — such as capitalist greed and lingering unequal power relations, especially between the East and the West — and create different kinds of cross-cultural exchanges.

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